

Not Just National News: Traumatic Effects of Racially Motivated Violence in Media

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INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that the mental health of Black Americans is negatively affected by exposure to racism. One meta-analysis found the correlation between perceived racism and mental distress amongst African Americans = 0.2¹.

Race-based traumatic stress is a phenomenon that some psychologists use to describe the emotional experience of an individual from a racial minority after experiencing encounters with racism^{1,2}. Symptoms can include:

- Somatization
- Interpersonal sensitivity
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Anger
- Worthlessness
- Humiliation

Race based trauma can occur vicariously by hearing about relevant news events³. Moreover, hearing about violence towards African Americans can bring up passed down stories of racism, exemplifying the intergenerational nature of race based trauma passed down within Black American families⁴. The sense of helplessness created from watching pertinent news media can also be considered source of stress. Anger can be a common coping mechanism, leading to riots and vandalism; however, more healthy coping mechanisms include peaceful protests, prayer, and community activism. Other responses to news events can include fear and a sense of isolation.



ANALOGS:

Research on Media Exposure to Mass Trauma on Children

35% of parents reported that their children had at least 1 substantial stress symptom 3-5 days after viewing TV news coverage on 9/11.

- 47% said their children worried about their or a loved one's safety
- Symptoms increased with number of hours of news coverage watched
- >30% had symptoms in geographically remote areas (e.g. the West)⁶

In 2,000 middle school students with no direct connection to the 1997 Oklahoma City federal building bombing, the degree of bombing-related TV viewing was directly related to PTSD symptoms 7 weeks later.⁶

- 2 years later: Media exposure predicted PTSD symptomatology in 6th graders living within 100 miles with no direct connection.⁷

Study of children's reactions to 3 news events: 9/11, child kidnappings in California in 2002, and the 2002 Washington D.C. sniper shootings. Media exposure to all three events contributed to worry. Also:

- Sniper shootings - children of color (Black, Hispanic) worried more
- Kidnappings: Black children worried more
- Black children more likely to change their activities⁸

One can apply these studies done on the general population to people of color and incidents of race-based violence in the US.

CONCLUSION

Further research is needed to examine psychological effects of racially motivated violence on children, especially black American children.

As psychiatrists there are measures we can take to help patients affected by vicarious race-based trauma:

- Examine our countertransference⁹
- Take inquisitive stance with patients⁹
- Encourage time away from social and traditional media
- Suggest that patients strengthen support systems, for example by referring to groups like Emotional Emancipation Circles¹⁰
- Evaluate patients for symptoms of anxiety or trauma and treat accordingly

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